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AUTHOR Tate, Carol Satterfield; Warren, Amye R.
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the extent to which children are willing to be coached into giving false descriptions of events and children's ability to provide such coached descriptions. Participants were 37 children from 3 years and 7 months to 7 years and 1 month of age. When children were urged to trick a "friend" of the experimenter, 1 child refused, 5 hesitated and then agreed, and 14 agreed immediately. Only 11 of the 19 actually carried through with the plan. Younger and older children appeared equally willing to go along with the trick, and were equally likely to spontaneously confess or to resist interrogation. Age differences began to emerge, however, when the quality of attempts to deceive was inspected. Results suggest that children can be coached into providing false statements, but the coaching is not easy and does not work very well, and its effects do not last very long for most children. (RH)

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THE EFFECTS OF ADULT'S COACHING ON CHILDREN'S WILLINGNESS TO PROVIDE FALSE REPORTS

Carol Satterfield Tate

North Carolina State University

Amye R. Warren, Ph.D.

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

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THE EFFECTS OF ADULT'S COACHING ON CHILDREN'S WILLINGNESS TO PROVIDE FALSE REPORTS

Recently there is an increasing focus on children's ability to provide accurate testimony in judicial proceedings. Researchers have investigated children's ability for accurate recall (see Chi, 1983; or Ornstein, 1978 for reviews), their resistance or susceptibility to post-event leading questions and other types of suggestibility (e.g., Ceci, Ross, & Toglia, 1987; Loftus & Davies, 1984), and their ability to distinguish fantasy from reality (Johnson & Foley, 1984). Particularly interesting is the research on children's willingness to revise their reports due to compliance with perceived adult expectations. Ceci, Ross, & Toglia (1987) found that children who were questioned by a 7-year-old were less likely to be misled by post-event information than were those questioned by an adult. Although this research shows children are somewhat suggestible, it does not address children's potential to be coached into making false statements. Researchers have also investigated children's ability to lie. Perhaps the first was the Hartshorne and May (1928) summary of studies on deception in which children are depicted as capable and frequent deceivers. Piaget (1932/65) also believed that until the ages of 7 or 8 years children "spontaneously alter the truth and...this seems to [them] perfectly natural and completely harmless" (p.285). A recent review by Vasek (1986) continues this bleak picture of the trustworthiness of children, as she reports "college students believe that children under 6 are highly prone to be liars, second only to politicians."

This attitude frequently is seen in the courtroom as well. In general, children are considered less credible witnesses than adults (e.g., Goodman, Bottoms, Herscovici, & Shaver, 1989), possibly due to the belief that their testimony is especially susceptible to coaching. Indeed, this seems to be one of the most common defenses used by those accused of crimes against children, underscoring the importance of this issue. Recently Haugaard and Crosby (1989) explored the question of whether young (4- to 6-years-old) children believe that something they are told to say by their parents is the truth, even when it is not. They found that the vast majority of the children knew a child was lying, even though it was the child's mother who told her to do so. Some added input on lying comes from language researchers via de Villers and de Villers (1978) who recognize that lying is a difficult task, calling for the liar to identify when and how to successfully negotiate the cues which are present in the conversational context. Telling a lie and "getting away with it" involves taking the listener's perspective to create a plausible story, monitoring listener feedback in case modifications are necessary, and remaining alert for situational contradictions or personal slipups. Thus older children, who are better perspective takers should be better liars and young, possibly egocentric, children should be less effective liars. However, it has been found that under certain simplified conditions even children 3 and 1/2 years of age can construct deceitful utterances (Sodian, 1989). Piaget's work indicates that to a child between 6 and 10 years of age, any untruth is a lie, even if it is unintentionally misleading. A "genuine lie" is defined by DePaulo and Jordan (1982) as "verbal and non-verbal concoctions intended to mislead." According to DePaulo &

Jordan (1982), the first lies told by children appear to be attempts to avoid punishment. Next to appear are lies told to obtain material rewards, subtle social rewards (self-presentation) and finally lies told to save or sacrifice some one else (loyalty then altruism). In their review of the literature they find that first graders are unskilled liars, who in their attempts at deceit often allow their true emotions to "leak" out in facial expressions, body language and tone of voice, rendering their lie obvious to their parents and, sometimes, their peers (DePaulo & Jordan, 1982). The literature seems to suggest that children can lie and are somewhat suggestible, so it is possible that they can be coached. In the present study we attempted to address these aspects of credibility. We examined the extent to which children are willing to be coached into giving false descriptions of events, as well as their ability (or lack thereof) to provide such coached descriptions.

Method

Subjects: The participants in this study were 37 children (predominantly white, middle class) from 3;7 to 7;1 years of age (M = 5;3). The data from one subject was lost due to equipment malfunction and one child declined participation. Substantial amounts of data are missing for 5 of the children due to their unexpected departure from the childcare center (e.g., illness or family plans) therefore, a total of 7 have been excluded from any analysis. Procedure: The primary experimenter (E1) was known to the children (stepmother of one of their classmates) and she spent time prior to the experiment interacting with them in a group setting to facilitate greater familiarity and comfort. On the day of the experiment, each child individually accompanied E1 to an available space outside the regular classroom. All children looked

at a picture book with E1 for approximately 5 minutes. This interaction allowed the child to become more comfortable with E1 and, in addition, transcripts of it provide a measure of the child's expressive language ability. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary test was also administered in order to ascertain the child's receptive vocabulary. All individual interactions were recorded on audio tape. At the conclusion of this interaction, E1 suggested that she and the child play with toys present in the room.

In the control condition the experimenter and child played with some plastic nose masks, any of the other toys in which the child was interested, and a magnetic building toy.

In the experimental condition, the experimenter and child also played with the masks and toys, except for the magnetic building toy (target toy). At this time, E1 said to the child, " Look at this neat toy. Hey, I know! Let's try and fool my friend. When she comes back, let's pretend we played with this toy. Look at these pictures of the stuff you can build; what do you want to tell her we built? (if the child did not select a picture, E1 selected one) No matter what my friend says, let's say we really did play with it. Let's try to trick her". Before terminating the interaction with the child, E1 again rehearsed the child by saying, "What are you going to tell her we did/built?" and cautioned the child "not to forget." The first experimenter then left the room.

The second experimenter then entered the room and interviewed the child by asking questions such as, "What did you do in school this morning? Did you have fun playing in here? Tell me what you did/built. Did you play with anything else?" After the free recall period the

children were asked specifically about each toy that was present, "Did you play with this? What did you do with it?" Next the children were asked, "Did she touch your nose? Did she touch you anywhere else?" Finally, all children were asked, "Is that what you really did? Are you telling me the truth?"

After the interaction, the children who participated in the "trick" assisted the first experimenter (E1) in debriefing the other experimenter (E2). E1 told the child, "We'd better tell E2 what we really did. You always have to tell the truth." The child then explained the nature of the "trick" and also explained that an attempt was made to fool the experimenter (E2).

Results

The responses to the questions and demands posed by both experimenters were coded and possible age differences in the frequency of each type of response were investigated. When the first experimenter (E1) suggested to the 20 children in the experimental group that they "trick" her friend, only one child refused. Five others hesitated and then agreed while 14 agreed immediately. Only 11 of these 19 children actually carried through with the plan. When E2 entered the room, two children (one younger and one older) immediately told her the "lie" almost as if they wanted to do it before they forgot, or because they were so excited to be part of the "trick". Five other children volunteered the information during the free recall portion of the questioning and the remaining four children had to be asked specifically about the target toy. A few of the children also spontaneously "confessed" that they were tricking E2 (2 younger children and 1 older child). When asked specifically "Is that what you really did?", three

more of the children "confessed" (and all of the control children stuck to their stories); one more child confessed when asked "Are you telling me the truth?" Thus, only three children maintained the ruse throughout. Chi square analyses revealed no age differences for any of these responses. The ability of the children to describe an event which they had not actually experienced was examined by transcribing the children's responses to the questions "Tell me what you did/built. Did you play with anything else?" (which we termed their free recall or free report), and their responses to the question "What did you do/build with that toy?" (referring to the target toy that only the control group had actually played with). The transcripts were analyzed for the elaboration of the responses, in terms of number of words. An analysis of variance with experimental condition as the grouping variable and the elaboration measure for free report as the dependent variable revealed a significant conditions effect (F (1,28) = 7.5, p <.0103). The control group had significantly more elaborate reports (6.7 words compared to 3.0 words, see Table 1). The same effect was found in response to the more specific question regarding the toy, with the control group averaging 17.7 words in their responses and the experimental group only 8.1 (F (1,28) = 5.6, p < .0248). To further examine our subjective impression that the older children had been more effective "liars", we conducted the same analyses using age as an additional grouping measure. Our sample size is actually inadequate for these analyses but they revealed possible trends for subsequent investigation. For the free report elaboration, a significant group effect was again noted (F (1,26) = 4.7, p < .04), and a trend of an age by group interaction (p < .14) was also observed, in which the younger children appeared to be less

able than the older children to "make up" an elaborate story about something they had not done. In other words, the benefits of actually having participated in the event were greatest for the younger children. For the specific toy question however, if an age by condition interaction does exist at all (with our current sample it is not significant, $p < .27$), it appears to be in the opposite direction (see Table 1). The group main effect is still present (F (1,26) = 7.81, $p < .0096$), and a slight effect of age was observed ($p < .08$). The age differences in elaboration may be due as much to differences in verbal abilities as they are to different knowledge bases (from which to "make up" elaborate reports). Thus, we administered the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test to all children and plan to examine the level of expressive language as well. The raw vocabulary score was unsurprisingly correlated with age (.46), and moderately correlated with the elaboration of the free report (.25), but correlated less well with the response elaboration to the specific toy question (.14). Interestingly, the free report and the specific report were strongly correlated (.59). When age was factored out (in this case by using the standard, age-adjusted PPVT scores), no relationship was seen between receptive vocabulary and elaboration ($r = .06$ for both free and specific reports). Thus our preliminary results suggest that language abilities, at least in the receptive mode, are not responsible for much of the variability in report elaboration for this event.

Considering the potential application of our research to the area of false allegations of sexual abuse, we were interested in whether children would remember being touched by the experimenter (E1) during the session. E1 touched each child on the nose while playing with the

animal noses, and then touched each child elsewhere at least once; typically on the stomach, legs or arms, sometimes in tickling. After the second experimenter (E2) questioned the children about the toys with which they had played, she asked "Did she touch you on the nose?" and "Did she touch you anywhere else?" We were surprised that only one child reported being touched on the nose (two of the children responded that they didn't know if they'd been touched, the remaining 27 said no). Additionally surprising were the children's responses to the second question with only three reporting being touched anywhere other than the nose (two did not know if they'd been touched, and 25 reported they had not been touched anywhere).

Discussion

Although past research has suggested that older children would be more likely to lie than younger children, these studies have focused on children over the age of six years. In our study of preschoolers, no such age differences emerged in that younger and older children appeared equally willing to "go along with" the trick, and were no more or less likely to spontaneously confess or to resist interrogation. The age differences began to emerge, however, when we looked at the quality of the attempts to deceive. Older children provided more elaborate descriptions of the event in which they had not participated. There are many possible explanations for the older children's greater elaboration. One explanation comes from Piaget's work on children's judgments of lies, in which six- to ten-year-olds used the length and plausibility of statements in making their determinations, with one child reporting that a lie is worse if you tell "lots of things, not just one sentence but a long one" (Piaget, 1932/65, p. 153). It is possible that the young

children in our study said little due to similar beliefs that the more they said, the "worse" their trick would become. We favor two other interpretations, however; older children's greater language facility in general and their greater familiarity with similar events (providing a knowledge base from which to manufacture a plausible but false story). Although the older children were better at providing accounts of this non-experienced event, their accounts were still clearly lacking in comparison to the children who had indeed participated in the event.

In sum, our results suggest that children can be coached into providing false statements (at least in the context of a harmless trick), but the coaching is not easy and does not work very well or last very long for the majority of children. Our preliminary results are open to many interpretations, and thus we must strongly caution about leaps to applications to children's coached statements of sexual abuse. Just a few of the problems in generalizing from our study include the type of coaching (a trick, not a lie), the type of event (playing with a toy is a familiar and not a "naughty" event), the adult coach (a relative stranger, not a parent or a trusted other), the interrogator (a friend of the coach), and the perceived consequences of lying (minimal to none at all). However, we will suggest a few possible issues and applications from our study for your consideration.

First, several authors have proposed a developmental sequence for lying as we mentioned earlier. DePaulo and Jordan (1982) suggested that the earliest lies to emerge are those told to escape imminent punishment. Next are lies told to obtain rewards (first material, then social), and then lies to protect or hurt another person. How would a lie told by a child in response to adult coaching fit into this

progression? If they fit at all, our suggestion is that they are told more to obtain the approval (or avoid the punishment) of the coach than they are designed to "get the accused" in trouble. Obviously, further research on the age of emergence of these types of lies is required.

Second, it is crucial to discover whether older children's increased abilities to construct convincing or elaborate accounts of events which have not occúrred are due to general verbal facility or event familiarity (knowledge base) in order to apply the findings to sexual abuse allegations. It is "common wisdom" among social workers, child psychologists, and others, that young children "simply do not lie" about sexual abuse, mainly because they are thought to lack the motivation to lie and the requisite knowledge about sexual behavior. Two questions come to mind about this assumption. Can children be given adequate preparation by the adult coach to appear knowledgeable? Moreover, how elaborate do children really need to be in allegations of sexual abuse?

Finally, is it possible that older children are unfairly maligned? Simply because older children may have greater deceptive abilities in some contexts, one should not assume that they will necessarily engage in more deceptive behavior, especially in the context of falsely reporting sexual abuse. As DePaulo and Jordan (1982) point out, the abilities that augment success in lying can be counteracted by an "increase in emotionality about the moral and interpersonal ramifications of deceit". Vasek (1986) also suggests that the very "skills which make deception possible also seem responsible for developing the more positive social skills such as empathy and compassion. Thus perspective-taking may act as a natural check on a

person's more antisocial deceptive practices..." (1986, p. 289).

Our study thus has raised more questions than it has answered. We plan to continue this study, adding more children to each condition, adding an additional condition in which children who participate in an event are told to say they have not done so, and possibly adding an older group of children. Much further work in this area is needed to answer the question of adult's coaching influence on children's willingness and ability to provide false reports.

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